

Surprising Hedius Verus: how Roman statues worked

Peter Stewart

The Romans rarely set up statues of themselves. It was a great honour to be awarded a portrait statue – it meant you were considered a notable man or woman who had done some good deed which needed recognising. But the etiquette of giving and receiving honour is never simple, and Peter Stewart shows how complicated the negotiation over this honour in the Roman world might become.

The village of Moresby in Cumbria has no doubt seen many distinguished and noble visitors through history, but the earliest is very probably Gaius Hedius Verus. Verus was a noble officer in the Roman army. In A.D. 127 he was in command of a mixed infantry and cavalry unit named ‘the Second Cohort of Lingones’, which was stationed at Moresby (the Roman Gabrosentum) around that time. Did he enjoy it? Without wishing to insult Cumbria or its climate, the answer is ‘probably not’. For Verus came from the warmer region of Umbria in Italy.

This tiny glimpse into a detail of Roman military history comes from a so-called ‘diploma’ – a discharge document belonging to one of Verus’ soldiers (see below, and compare p. 14). The information would not be very significant in itself, but for the fact that we know a little more about Verus’ later life.

How much is a statue worth?

Jump forward maybe ten or fifteen years and we find Verus safely back home in Umbria. His native town was called Pitinum Mergens, but he was a notable personality also in the nearby town of Forum Sempronii (modern Fossombrone). Like many wealthy Romans of his class, Verus had followed a military career by holding various civilian posts, priest-hoods, and magistracies. He had held such offices in both towns, and both towns enjoyed generous gifts and benefactions from him.

As a result, the people of Forum Sempronii decided to set up a statue in his honour. However, such was Verus’ modesty and kindness that he prevented the community from making the statue. As far as he was concerned, their decree was honour enough: they should not waste

their efforts and money on an expensive monument. Nevertheless, in the end his effort to refuse the gift was thwarted, because the town-councillors – wealthy local notables like Verus himself – decided to intervene and erect the statue at their own personal expense.

Sadly the statue, which was made of bronze, does not survive. Its only trace is the ‘footprints’ – holes for attachment – that it left on its marble pedestal. But this rather forlorn statue-base is extremely informative in itself because, as was the norm in the Roman world, it bears an inscription identifying the subject of the portrait and stating the circumstances of its manufacture. In fact, the whole sequence of events described above can be deduced from the inscription. Like other, similar texts, it lists the main stages in Verus’ military and civilian career (including his spell with the Lingones). It also explains the people’s attempt to honour him ‘on account of his merits’, and the town-councillors’ intervention. In this case we do not know exactly what Verus’ ‘merits’ were, but they probably boil down to money. No doubt he constructed or restored some public buildings, financed spectacles in the arena, or offered some other kind of economic support for the communities with which he was involved.

Portraying honour

Nine times out of ten, this is what Roman public portrait statues were for, at least when they represented private individuals like Verus. There is a common misconception that Roman men and women set up their own statues. It is all too easy to slip into talking about Roman portraits as a kind of ‘self-representation’ – the means for promoting one’s public image. But the Romans disapproved strongly of such

self-promotion. Even with less public portraits – for example, images set up in temple precincts or private homes – the portrait was generally erected by someone other than the person it depicted.

The inscription on Verus’ statue-base reminds us of this fact. It also explains why statues worked in this way. To receive a statue of oneself, particularly in some prominent place like the forum of a Roman town, was a huge honour and a source of great prestige. But the prestige came from the fact that it was a gift: an award from those people, whether individuals, groups, or whole communities, who had benefited from one’s good deeds. Anyone can boast about their own generosity, but an honorific statue set up by others was proof of the recipient’s ‘merits’.

In reality it was predictable that generous gifts to a community would result in honours such as statues. Yet this was not a foregone conclusion: if it were, then the honour would be diminished. Perhaps there is a loose parallel in the modern British honours system, whereby certain kinds of people – senior civil servants, captains of industry, political donors, and so on – are regularly given knighthoods or other rewards, but these (we are assured) are not given automatically.

Incidentally, the same principle applies even to Roman emperors and their relatives, who were by far the most common recipients of statues all over the empire. Strange as it may seem to us, these statues were not ordered by the emperor but were more or less ‘spontaneous’ expressions of gratitude by imperial subjects, thanking and celebrating the ruler because of his patronage and protection.

Inscribing honour

All over the empire, surviving inscriptions on statue-bases record this process of expressing thanks through statues. Those of us who are interested in Roman art tend to forget about these inscriptions, partly because the statues to which they belonged are now lost or have become separated. Yet occasionally we can see the full effect, as in the pictures on the previous page. In one we see a wealthy bene-

factress of Pompeii called Eumachia, whose statue was displayed in a huge building constructed at her expense. The base tells us that the statue was set up by the fullers (cloth-workers) of the town. Another shows the bronze statue of Mammius Maximus, a benefactor of nearby Herculaneum, which was discovered in the town's theatre. A bronze plaque from the statue's base says that the sculpture was set up by citizens and residents of Herculaneum 'by public subscription'.

The case of Hedius Verus has more to tell us, however. For, unusually, there is a second inscription, on the side of his statue-base. It is the text of a letter written to him by the town-councillors of Forum Sempronii. Loosely translated, this is what it says:

Dear Verus,

Because of your many great distinctions, the imperial honours you have received, your conspicuous generosity towards our community, the affection that you show to our citizens and receive back from them, your outstanding modesty of behaviour and your notable respect – because of all this, we have been obliged to give you suitable thanks (as far as that's possible) without your knowledge. For some time ago we decided to erect a standing statue of you at our own expense. But we did not send you a copy of our decree, for this reason: the last time a statue was decreed for you at public expense, you wrote back to say that you were happy with the honour alone. That was a true illustration of your modesty; in fact it reproached us with our own feebleness. So we did not want you to do that again. Therefore the statue has been decreed, and so that you cannot turn it down this time, it has already been made and it's on its way here. It only remains to say, if you would be so kind, please let us know what sort of inscription you think should be put on it. We wish you well.

This letter is a unique record of the delicate dialogue that must have taken place before the erection of any honorific statue. We have to suspect that it was Verus' own suggestion to have it copied onto the statue-base. In other words, when invited to suggest an inscription, he asked for the town-councillors' elegant (and flattering) letter to be included! The letter reinforces the information given more succinctly in the main inscription, and presumably both texts complemented the visual message of the statue itself, for whatever its form, it must have served to present an ideal image of Verus and his position. The letter also reminds us again that people really did not

set up their own images. But there is a further complication to this already intricate story.

According to the main inscription on the base, Verus literally had the last word in this affair. It tells us that, while accepting the town-councillors' statue, he gave each and every one of these men a gift of money to the tune of seventy sesterces. This very probably amounted to at least as much as the cost of the statue itself!

Buying one's own honour?

So should we conclude that Hedius Verus effectively bought his own statue? It is true that such donations were common in Italy. We often learn from inscriptions that such and such a recipient of a statue 'refunded' the money that had been spent on his statue – which may well mean that he paid for it up front. Yet what the case of Hedius Verus shows us is that this was far from being a matter of 'cash for honours'; indeed for him the honour was even a surprise. Behind every statue there must be a lost story of polite exchanges: wealthy men helping their communities; the communities thanking them with the award of statues; and the recipients feeling bound, in turn, to extend their generosity further. To put it simply: statues helped to make the Roman world go round.

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